

Fortnightly Sermon

By
JAMES VILA BLAKE

Minister Third Unitarian Church
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YAHWEH IN THE BIBLE

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YAHWEH IN THE BIBLE.

This morning I shall speak to you of Yahweh in the Bible. Yahweh is the same as Jehovah, but is the more correct pronunciation. Nevertheless we cannot be sure that this is the true sound of it, as it was spoken by the Hebrews of old. The sound of that holy name was forgotten by the Hebrews because it was held by them so holy that it might not be spoken without sacrilege. According to the Rabbinical tradition, it might be spoken but once in the year, and then by only one man in the nation, namely, the High Priest when he entered annually into the Holy of Holies in the Temple. Beyond this it could never be spoken; and that tradition has come down so unbroken among the Jews that in their synagogues to-day, in their reading of the Scriptures, they put another word in the place of Yahweh when they come to that name in the text. Now perhaps this may be a superstition; I will not say it is not. Indeed, I know that the human spirit in sincerity is free of the whole universe, to use and to speak what it will. And yet that old superstition had a high and holy beauty about it, in my mind. It is in the spirit of the words of Sir Thomas Browne, which always pleased me; he says, "I confess I am naturally inclined to that which misguided zeal terms superstition. My conversation I do acknowledge austere, my behavior full of rigor, sometimes not without morosity; yet at my devotion I love to use the civility of my knee, my hat and my hand, with all the outward and sensible motions which may express or promote my invisible devotion." "I should violate mine own arm," he says, "rather than a church, and I could never hear the Ave-Mary bell without an elevation." I like that tender and delicate spirit of devotion which thus takes up with soft and reverent touch all that belongs to things sacred and

religious. The quick, harsh, sudden and familiar use of sacred names seems to me unreligious, even irreligious, and very sad.

I like not those, nor do I think much of their piety, on whose lips the Sacred Name is taken oftenest and most easily; and when it is taken, I like the custom of that reverent and holy man who never could say the name of God without a little pause, and a hush and lowering of the tone. We speak of the whispers of love; why not also the softened tone, the whisper, the reverent utterance and the hush of simple and pure religious feeling? Quiet is in itself so holy and so lovely that it belongs in holy places, and with sacred and religious names. "A wide quiet," saith a poet, very beautifully, "A wide quiet on the hilltops falling," and the same singer speaking of his presence on a hill, by hills surrounded and lifted high up into the blue of a summer sky, says:

"Nighed in the mighty minster we,
Beneath the dome of radiant blue:
Cathedral-hush on every side,
And worship breathing through.

The Silence, awful living word,
Behind all sound, behind all thought,
Whose speech is Nature-yet-to-be,
The Poem yet unwrought."

Thus would I that quiet and holy silence and hush of voice should invest sacred names and thoughts. Parker says it is beautiful to have a pious mind, and sometimes to speak therefrom, and the love of God, he says, may cover over all our lives with simple beauty and joy; but "unhappy is the man or woman who tattles thereof, foaming at the mouth in some noisy conference, as in a village cur barks to cur; but blessed is he whose noiseless piety sweetens his daily toil, filling the house with the odor of that ointment." Epictetus advises thus, "Think of God oftener than you breathe." Ah yes, think of him in everything, in thine awaking, in thy fresh strength in the morning, at thy morning meal and thy morning labor, and thy noon-day rest; and when the night descends with its quiet, and its sentinels of stars watching the holy peace, then think of him; and when thou liest down to sleep and art not afraid, think of him. In the rain-drop, in the bird's music, in the glorious light of day, in the march of the orbs of the heavens, think of him. Think of him

in thy friendships and thy loves, in thy home circles; in the dignity of thy daily toils too, and under the sweet refreshing quality of thy fatigue which laps thee in holy slumber, think of him. Think of him, ah yes! But *that* is the emphasis,—*Think* of him. Speak not of him. If Epictetus had said, Speak of God oftener than you breathe, surely we should have felt no religion therein, and nothing like to the grand, old, patient slave-philosopher, no, but some profaneness and impiety. Therefore I say it was a high and holy superstition, if you call it such, which kept the holy name among the Jews from being taken into their mouths familiarly and commonly.

If we wish to gain some idea of what Yahweh was to the old Hebrew race, we must try to get a glimpse of the times before Moses. There we shall find that the ancient Yahweh was without doubt a Nature-god, as in the primitive beginnings of religion all the greatest deities are. For man naturally personifies first those things which most strike his senses; and that which first does that office for him is light and darkness, the glory of the sun which daily is swallowed up in the night, and again comes forth in the morning; so that the great deities which began religion were Nature-gods, and almost always either sun-gods, that is personifications of the sun's power and light, or else heaven-gods, that is rulers over the atmosphere and the clouds; and sometimes the two were joined together; and this was probably the case with Yahweh. Now, wherever you find a Nature-god you will find, first, that the deity is unmoral, I say not immoral, but unmoral; because the sun shines, the morning rises, the night descends, the rain falls, on the good and bad alike, without distinction. Nature makes no moral separations. Wherefore the Nature-gods show their favors and give their benign offices to those that serve them, but without regard at first to the moral condition of those that serve. So it was with Yahweh, as we may find traces in the Bible itself; as, for example in the fraud by which Jacob obtained the birthright of his brother, a fraud nevertheless which is smiled on by Yahweh when once the patriarch's word and faith are pledged to it.¹ Nature-gods, again, are either pleasure-loving deities, whom you will find most where nature is soft and benign

1. Gen. XXVII, XXVIII.

and the earth easily yields her increase ; or they are stern, austere, and terrible deities, as you will find most where the country is fierce and wild, and storms abound and the soil is rocky. This was the character of Yahweh. He was a god belonging far back in the Armenian hills whence the Hebrew race came. He was a stern, merciless, austere and terrible deity, delighting in human sacrifice, as the Bible plainly shows. It was ordained among the Hebrews that the first-born of every creature, man included, should be devoted and sacrificed to Yahweh in commemoration of the exodus from Egypt;¹ and it is probable that sometimes this dreadful doom was carried out literally, before, and even perhaps after, it became lawful to substitute a payment in money for the sacrifice of the first born of men. We see too in the stories of Abraham,² and of Jephthah's³ daughter, that the notion of human sacrifice by no means was foreign to the Hebrew thought. Such then was the Yahweh of the tribes in Goshen. He was perhaps a tribal god, worshiped by only one of the tribes, or perhaps he was worshiped by all of them, this common worship giving them perhaps a certain loose unity and nationality in their life in Goshen. Into this condition of things came the colossal influence of Moses. The great religious work of Moses was twofold. First, he chose a god for all Israel and proclaimed that he alone should be worshiped, that he only was Israel's deity ; and Moses chose for that god not any pleasure-loving divinity, or any less grand deity than the austere, mighty and terrible Yahweh. The second part of Moses' religious work was to invest that choice with moral conceptions, as he did by the ten Words or Commandments, which we may suppose date back to Moses more surely and competely than any other part of the early books of the Bible. Thus it was Moses' great glory that not only he chose a grand and austere and terrible deity, and not a pleasure-loving one, for his people, but he joined religion with life, and made piety to depend on right conduct and good living.

We cannot honor to highly such a great work as that at that early date. Indeed we must admit there are traces that the work could not be completed at once, and we cannot be sure just how

1. Exod, XIII, 11—15 : XXII, 29—30.

2. Gen. XXII. 3. Judges XI, 30—40

much of this lofty and pure conception lay unclouded and clear in Moses' own mind. For example, we find the narrative that when Yahweh looked down from the mountain, and beheld the people worshipping the golden calf, he fell into a great fit of wrath, and told Moses he would destroy all that rebellious race of people and build up a new race from Moses himself. And Moses then besought him not to do so, using a very strange argument, one would think, to address to a holy and grand deity; his plea is, If the Lord destroy his people that he has brought from the land of Egypt, the Egyptians will mock at the Lord, and say, Behold for evil he took them out from the land of Egypt, to slay them in the mountains and consume them from the face of the earth. ¹ And again it is related that Moses wished to see the face of God, and God told him that his face could not be seen by any one without death to him; but he said, I will set you in a cleft of the rock, and then I will pass by, and as I pass by I will put my hand over your eyes to shield you from beholding my face which would be death to you, and when I have passed by, then you may look forth and see my back as I go on. ² Thus we behold ascribed even to Moses and his time these inferior conceptions of the nature of Yahweh. Yet Moses' choice, and his association with it of moral conceptions, was a strong seed which grew and prospered and developed in a spiritual direction. From which it followed that there began a struggle between the people on one side, who remained for generations on generations sunk in the lower conceptions, and the prophets on the other, who laid hold on the spirituality of the religion which Moses planted, and followed it to the heights. Let us then look for a moment at the conception of Yahweh among the people alone, then at the conception which the people held with the prophets in one, and then at the conception which the prophets held all alone, beyond and above the people.

The Hebrew people held sensuous conceptions of Yahweh. They made images of him, or at least images symbolical to them, notwithstanding the prohibition in their law. They had at one time in their history, the image of a bull, worshiped at different places in Palestine, associated, no doubt, with thoughts of Yahweh.

1. Exod. XXXII, 7—14.

2. Exod. XXXIII, 20—23.

They always conducted their worship in a sensuous manner, by external sacrificial rites. They held the idea that by sacrificing to Yahweh they could propitiate him, and that he was pleased with the smell of sacrifice and incense. They believed that in some shape he lived on the Ark between the Cherubim of that mysterious structure, so that they felt strong wherever they could carry the Ark with them; and when it was taken by the enemy, all courage deserted them.¹ The people also believed that Yahweh was one of many gods. For hundreds of years the prophets were warring with the people against their worship of other gods. The people bowed to the gods of the nations round about them; they thought that Yahweh indeed was the greatest and grandest of deities, but still that others were worthy of their adoration, and must be appeased.

The ideas which the people and the prophets held together were these: Yahweh was thought to be Israel's God in particular; he loved Israel; he had chosen that people, and cared nothing for the other nations of the earth,—indeed he was a foe of all other nations; but Israel he would nurse and bring to great glory, because they were his own chosen people, and he was their God. Also, the prophets and people together conceived of Yahweh as having a local habitation and abiding place. Indeed, he could not be worshiped, according to their conception, outside of Palestine, because he was not there to be worshiped, only living with his chosen people in the places where they were. Hence it was a terrible thing among the ancient Hebrews to be banished from their land or country, because they were banished also from their God; he could not be found in the strange and foreign countries they were driven to.² They also conceived that this local habitation was in the crystal heavens over the holy land which they occupied, and that there Yahweh dwelt and was the Yahweh of Hosts, which means the ruler of hosts of angels or messengers by which he executed his will on the earth, and also the ruler of the stars; for in the Hebrews' conception the stars were associated in some way with the angels, and the Yahweh of Hosts meant the Yahweh of the heavenly bodies and the angelic armies.

Now we come to the more glorious conception which the prophets held alone, to which the people had not risen. Chief

1. 1 Samuel IV.

2. 1 Samuel XXVI, 19.

and greatest among these was their view of the holiness of Yahweh. He was separated by his unimagined and inexpressible purity from all creation. He lived apart from it and above it, was not in any way mingled with it, was too pure to be in it. He was inexpressly exalted and holy, beyond all human conception, in the minds of the prophets. There are many passages of Scripture in the prophetic literature, expressing this very nobly: Isaiah says,

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts.
The whole earth is full of his glory,”

and in another place he calls Yahweh “the holy one of Israel.” Amos says: (v, 21–23,)

“I hate, I despise your feasts;
I have no delight in your solemn assemblies.
When ye offer me burnt offerings and flour-offerings,
I will not accept them,
And upon the thank-offerings of your fatlings I will not look.
Take ye away from me the noise of your songs,
And the music of your harps let me not hear;
Let justice flow forth as waters,
And righteousness as a mighty stream!”

That is to say, I will take no delight in the odour of your sacrifices and incense. For it was a part of this holiness of Yahweh in the minds of the prophets that he cared not for external worship, but for the inward state of the heart, and that all sacrifice and ceremony were to him as naught. What he desired was the inward worship of right conduct. This was a sublime conception which the people had not reached. Hosea says, (vi, 6,)

“I desire mercy and not sacrifice,
The knowledge of God more than burnt offerings;”
and again Isaiah (i, 11–17,)

“What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? saith Yahweh.
I am satiated with burnt-offerings of rams, and the fat of the fed beasts;
In the blood of bullocks and of lambs and of goats I have no delight.

When ye come to appear before me,
 Who hath required this of you, to tread my courts?
 Bring no more false oblations!
 Incense is an abomination to me,
 The new moon also and the sabbath and the calling of
 the assembly;
 Iniquity and festivals I cannot endure.
 Your new moons and your feasts my soul hateth;
 They are a burden to me;
 I am weary of bearing them.
 When ye spread forth your hands,
 I will hide mine eyes from you;
 Yea, when ye multiply prayers, I will not hear;
 Your hands are full of blood!
 Wash you; make you clean;
 Put away your evil doings from before mine eyes;
 Cease to do evil;
 Learn to do well;
 Seek justice; relieve the oppressed;
 Defend the fatherless; plead for the widow!"

And again, those noble words from Micah, (vi, 6-8,)

"Wherewith shall I come before Yahweh,
 And bow myself before the most high God?
 Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
 With calves of a year old?
 Will Yahweh be pleased with thousands of rams,
 Or with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
 Shall I give my first-born for the sin of my soul,
 The fruit of my body for my transgression?"

You will notice here that even in the times of Micah this thought of the possibility of human sacrifice was still so well known to the people that the prophet might mention it without fear of being misunderstood. Then says Micah, answering his question gloriously,

"He hath showed thee, O man, what is good;
 What doth Yahweh require of thee,
 But to do justly and to love mercy,
 And to walk humbly before thy God?"

This was a high, glorious and holy conception of Yahweh in the

minds of the prophets. They also considered him the only creator of all nature, and of all mankind. Nothing was made that was not made by Yahweh. They spoke of him also as the one supreme ruler, lawgiver and power of the earth; and among all the nations, not only over his chosen people, but over all other nations too, did he reign, according to the prophets, and would yet bring them to the holy city and to his own foot-stool in the enjoyment of the glory of the one God of Israel. That was the prophetic dream. Yahweh, too, in the minds of the prophets, was the giver of every blessing; no good thing but came from his hands. Also he was the giver of all calamities and evils. Amos says very plainly, "Shall evil be done in the city, and the Lord not do it?" But not only so; Yahweh also created and enforced *moral* evils. It was the Lord who hardened the heart of Pharaoh to prevent his people from going, that thus the Lord's wonders might be worked and the king punished.¹ Not only so, but he is represented by the prophets as hardening the hearts of his own people,² the Israelites, that he may show his glory and holiness by punishment of the wicked, before at last he brings all the chosen nation back to his mercy. Yahweh was the head of a moral government of the world, which he administered by penalties, that is, by natural and historical calamities, failures in war, loss of battles, subjugation by foreign peoples, storms, earth-quakes. Events of this kind were considered Yahweh's punishments for guilt. We look on such things now in a better and higher way. It is very hard for us to understand how religious people could conceive of their deity as deliberately hardening the hearts of his people in order that he might punish them for that same hardening of the heart. But we are dealing, we must remember, with people that never reasoned, never philosophized, were merely worshipers, primitive worshipers too at this time, full of their thoughts of wonders, signs and miracles. It has been always the genius of the Semitic peoples, the Hebrews, the Arabs and other like races, to conceive of their deities as outside of nature, making it, and ruling it from outside. Wherever that conception exists, it will be found to go with the notion of miraculous interference, of ruling by means of arbitrary penalties, sent in the shape of convul-

1. Exod, VII, 3.

2. Is, LXIII, 17.

sions of nature or historical calamities. But we conceive of God not as out of nature, but as in nature, living in nature; I would rather say indeed *living nature*, living it forth. He *is* nature. I might speak of Nature as the visibility, the audibility, the tangibility of God. And when we have that thought of him, not anywhere far off, always in all that he has made, or I would rather say all that he is now making or appearing, then we come into the realm of beautiful and glorious and living order, and all these strange ancient conceptions fly away like morning mists. Then we find order reigning from the least little atom to the most gigantic globe, in all the external domain of nature; and the little dew drop takes on its semi-globular shape on the leaf, and the rain drop falls in its fiery sphere, by the same laws that govern the revolution of the earth and the motions of the planets. And the same order rules in the moral sphere, whether it be in the small angers of the little child with which we wrestle in the nursery, or the uprisings of a city, or the gigantic clamors and wars and frantic wraths of a people, or the great struggles and moral turmoils, the crimes, the cruelties, of the whole earth. It is one law, one method, one nature that runs through all, and they are all taken up into the uttermost purposes of the same power of God. And the same order runs through all our joys. It is the same thing when the little child prattles and smiles in infantile gaiety, and when we with our larger knowledge experience the joys of love, of friendship, of thought, even of mere healthy living, of glorious animal existence—the same thing through all, and up to the beatific songs of the seraphs; it is the same glory, the same God-like fact, and all included in the one marvel of order, “the stream of tendency.” Then, with this conception we take the last great step; we learn that law and love are one, are the same, “named with the Everlasting Name.”

Another point of the noble way in which the prophets regarded Yahweh was his unity. The prophets were monotheists strictly. They worshiped no other deity whatever. They were always struggling with the idolatries of the people, always proclaiming that there was but one God, and that one was Yahweh. The Hebrew prophets continually are saying in their own language that which is the noble utterance of the Koran, “There is no God but God.” I call that a very noble utterance. It runs all

through the Arabian religion, "There is no God but God." I must pause a moment to think of the ethical significance and moral power of that saying. For a man must be conceived as worshiping that which he believes in. That is the true object of his worship; not anything he *names* deity, but what truly he believes and trusts in. So it is for the health of a man if truly and constantly he says, "There is no God but God;" very great strength and help is in it. When tempests or gusts of passion, immoderate desires, raging appetites, vagrant feelings, sway us, then we shall be stayed, and be able to rule ourselves, and have the glory that we are obeyed by ourselves, if we can say strongly, in the midst of tempests and gusts, "There is no God but God." We shall not bow then to our passions or appetities. Or if we be led by ambitions to rise higher in power, to rule over men, to have great fame, and perhaps we tremble on the verge of sacrificing our manly honor, our strict principles, our noblest sense of perfect pure integrity, to gain that high gleaming prize, then it will be well if we ask ourselves what truly we are worshiping, and say with the Arabs, "There is no God but God." Or if we are pursuing any more ignoble things, the pleasures and comforts which riches give, or the ease and luxury which our neighbors' ostentations show, we shall do well to pause and think what we may be worshiping—a golden idol, no less an idol because it is golden—and say with the Koran scriptures, "There is no God but God. Yes, if we be devotees too, if we think we have within us the light of true religion, and yet really we be pursuing the glories of heaven, the joys of the world to come, or we be trying to escape the pains of hell, it will be well for us to ask ourselves whether we be truly worshiping God, or not rather bowing down to our own pleasures and comforts, not the less because they are transferred beyond this mortal sphere; and we shall be rebuked and brought back to simple pure worship, if we say, "There is no God but God."

Finally, the Hebrew prophets regarded themselves as in direct communication with Yahweh himself. This is important, for the Hebrew people were what is called a theocratic people. Perhaps the best notion of a theocratic nation is this,—One in which not the individual, but the nation, is the religious unit. That is to say, the Hebrews' conception, the popular

conception I mean, of Yahweh was this, that Yahweh favored the worshiper not as a man, but as a Hebrew, and that as one of the chosen people he was to be gathered under Yahweh's almightiness. Now it was a balance against this that the prophets considered themselves to come into direct, personal, individual relation with Yahweh, and to have his inspiration in their own souls, and to proclaim, therefore, by authority, his word, and say, "Thus saith the Lord." Therein these exalted teachers of the Hebrew people proclaimed the one absolute fundamental necessity and truth of religion, that you, that I, stand in the light of God's presence directly; that we need no intervention, no mediator, either by person or by church or by book, but that we stand as naked souls unto him, waiting in his presence as our eyes do in the glorious sunlight to behold by it all the earth. This is what makes religion a support, a joy and a life. Emerson says, "God enters by a private door into every individual;" and his emphasis is on the "every individual," since *to all* God comes; not to any chosen one here or anywhere, or at any time, but now and to all. And the next emphasis is on the "private door"; for why is it private? I suppose the seer means that each one has a different door, and that all doors alike open to God's presence and favor, not one door more than another. Or it may be at different times each man has a different door, as if he were builded from day to day, like a cathedral, with new porticoes and new windows for the entrance of heaven's light. The door may be perhaps a love of nature, a joy in the glorious and grand. Or the door may be a love of persons, a love of friends, by which we come to love God, by the scripture which our friends live to us or speak to us,—to love God, as Augustine said, and our friends in God and our enemies for God. Or it may be some great creation or work, or some noble cause, that is the door by which God enters. Whatever it be, he enters each heart and soul by its own door, and he enters surely if there be that door kept for the entrance by a consecrated will, striving earnestly to live in the light of the law of God. This I say is the sum, the foundation and glory of all religion. Or again, the door perhaps may be some great names and glories in the past. That is a good door. I dislike it not. Nay, I prize it greatly. The beauty of the Scripture, noble prophetic

names, Moses himself, Isaiah, and John and Jesus, and the gentle Huss, and many that come to us with prophetic halo around their heads, God-made, not man-made,—these may be the door by which God enters into us. But however it be, the great truth is that now he enters, that now the eternal life is in us, and we in it.

All this history of Yahweh in the Bible shows that religion grows noble and high with the growth of man. In the visions of the prophets and in the prayers of the people the thought of God was growing clearer, higher, nobler, purer continually. "Day unto day uttered speech, night unto night showed knowledge." Once the prophets and people thought Yahweh dwelt only in one corner of the earth or in the heavens above that little territory. But such poor and limited thoughts of God made way, slowly but constantly, for higher and spiritual thoughts of him, till the psalmist sang,

"If I take the wings of the morning,
And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
Even there shall thy hand lead me,
And thy right hand shall hold me."

Religion never was finished but always is finishing. There is no closed revelation. The thought of God, yea, let us say the *sight* of God, grows plainer and mightier and deeper and dearer to man's spiritual vision, age by age. With meaning vaster than merely to take the scripture page or the past saint however glorious, this truth comes—

"With meaning vaster,
Coming faster
Than my spirit can record,
The saint, the seer, it shows in me;
And while I see
How I am the buried good,
I stand within the flood
Of the eternal grace,
Trembling to know I am God's dwelling place."

